Narcissists make collectives stupider

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The non-hierarchical, consensus-based, mission-driven collective remains and pervades activist organizing bodies of every level. We love them, apparently. Yet I've seen the most collective energy drained to nothing when any one of those elements (the hierarchy, the consensus, the mission) is implicitly or explicitly challenged, and often from within. Someone is in some way not operating non-hierarchically, in a way that is supportive of consensus or, some would argue, in alliance with the mission, and the whole collective devolves into a miserable landscape of extra meetings and long emails with many feelings.

Collectives work, often brilliantly, until they don't. At least, collectives who haven't put anything in place to avoid such situations.

Collectives such as these can empower individuals to participate and learn from the get-go, stemming from social intelligence and group wisdom. However, collectives can also create the perfect framework for a narcissist to completely take over, invisibilized by the nature of the collective itself.

When an experienced member of a collective pulls a power play, such as making an ultimatum or blocking a consensus, such a move exists behind a massive collective blind spot, because every collective member has implicitly agreed to specific values and actions **(non-hierarchical, consensus-based, mission-driven)** by their presence, and everyone gives everyone else that best faith that they're operating under the same principles. A paradox emerges wherein within the definitionally non-hierarchical, collective, someone has pulled rank, which makes it, thus, **a hierarchy**. Whoops!

Power, particularly power over, will not fail to infuse our every interaction just because the space had been declared a power-free zone, like a banished evil spirit.

Being non-hierarchical must be as ongoing of a process like the external work itself.

We see this play out often when larger collectives of people must reckon with internalized trans/homophobia, racism, misogyny, ableism, etc., which all inevitably bubble up in diverse settings of collective members with unchecked perspective and privilege. And power itself, not just how it plays out on vectors of oppression, must be wrestled with; that is, if the space bills itself as non-hierarchical.

Because otherwise, the application of the non-hierarchical label implies we can be safely disarmed of our need to compete with others for power within a space. As a result, most members enter into a collective group setting in the spirit of working together and collaboratively finding solutions, assuming that everyone else does, too.

This is a setup. Those with little to no regard for collaborative values have all but been handed the opportunity to use coercive tactics on a group of people without recourse. Disarmament only works when everyone's on board.. When that someone isn't and asserts their power by blocking a consensus or just group process in general, it's a big problem.

The non-hierarchical, consensus-driven collective does not, as a rule, account for assholes. I saw this when I taught a summer leadership program for youth from a war-divided country. We assembled them in Arizona Town Hall-style decision-making bodies, trying to get them to work on seeing through each other's differences in order to build consensus. But we did not account for the assholes! Two students among the whole group would block consensus whenever they could, simply because they could. The process was ultimately inordinately frustrating for everyone.

I do not have a solution here. It seems that if people are going to be involved in collectives, they should have a collective ethos at the very least. But so much organizing is already done in good faith of our fellow organizers, or in the best faith we have following whatever vetting we do, that I'm not sure how to be on the lookout for that, or to be vigilant as collectives are in process. I think thinking through group processes in less-than-ideal scenarios would be more useful than best-case scenarios.

Accounting for the narcissists and the assholes seems wiser than assuming that everyone's going to work together once an intention for a group is set.

So, how do we avoid an overt concentration of power, and, as a corollary, concentration of skillsets among members?

How do we prevent blocks to process, valuing motion and action, in particular the unimpeded flow of energy, such a rare resource when it comes about?

How do we foster collective values among members but also not force it when the shoe simply doesn't fit?

Overall, how do we make our organizations smart and responsive, rather than bogged down in process and capable of being held up by a single person, while also not steamrolling individuals or succumbing to groupthink?

These are the questions we need to incorporate into the care and keeping of our organizing bodies, into collectives that build upon all of our smarts and require equitable buy-in of collective-maintaining emotional energy from all of us, not allowing for opt-outs and manipulation from those who would prefer to hold up group process instead.